

Journal Article

**The Global Sustainable Development
Goals: *Are we progress?***

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THE GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: ARE WE PROGRESSING?

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Progress of Sustainable Development Goals

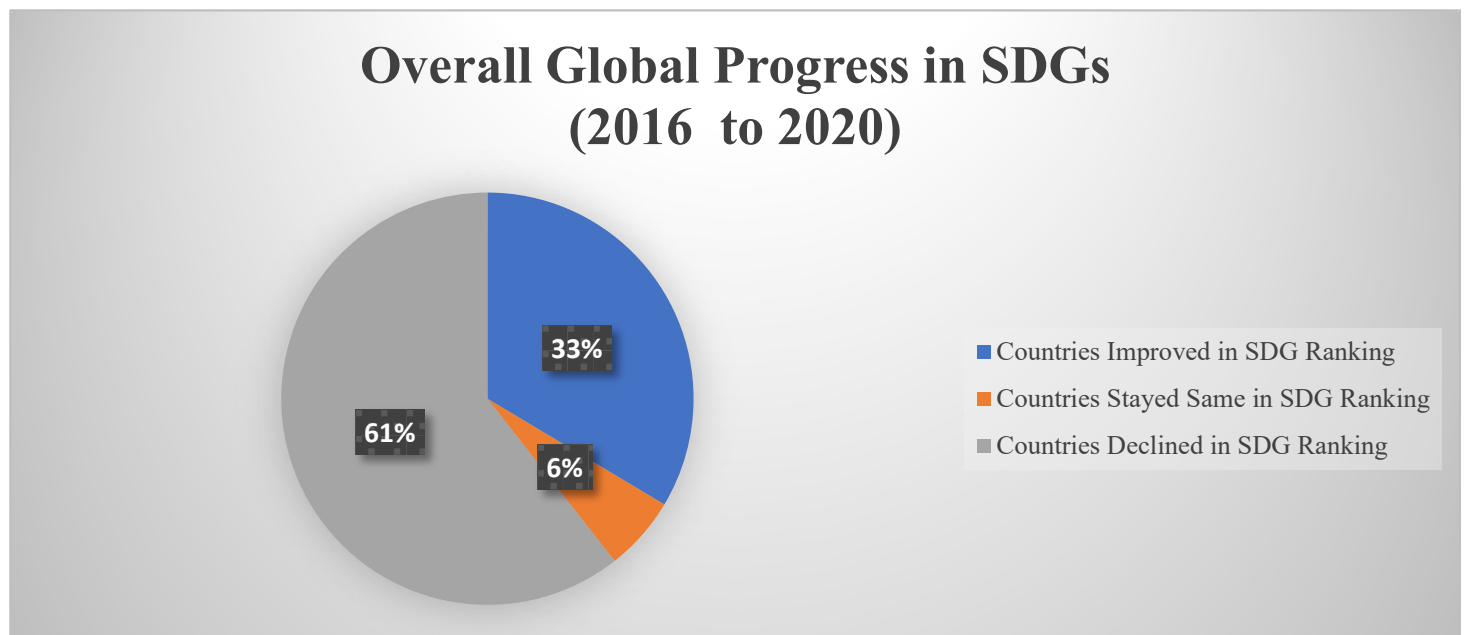
In 2015, all United Nations member states adopted the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In contrast, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were developing countries centric and had 60 indicators. SDGs are universal and address issues for both developed and developing countries. The SDGs are all-encompassing, with 17 goals and 169 associated targets addressing global objectives for economic development, social inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability. Compared with the 2016 global SDG ranking index, only 33% of all countries could improve their respective SDG ranking in 2020; 6% could maintain their status quo, while 61% of all countries declined in their overall SDG ranking.

In the “Countries Improved in SDG ranking” category, Europe has 18 countries, followed by the Asia and Oceania region with 13 countries. Among the North and South American countries, only ten were able to improve their overall ranking. Only five countries in the African region featured in this category.

Most of the “Countries declined in SDG ranking” category are from the African region, followed by the Asia and Oceania region, the European region, and the North-South America region.

In 2016 and 2020, Sweden and Denmark ranked at the top in the overall SDG ranking.

Figure-1 Overall Global Progress in SDGs between 2016-2020



Progress of individual SDGs and targets between 2016-2020

The protection of biodiversity (particularly concerning Goal-14: Life Below Water), sustainable consumption and production, sustainable agriculture, and obesity are the most concerning areas for high-income countries. Over the years, income equality, such as the gender pay gap, has become a growing challenge among most high-income countries. Ending poverty and access to essential services and infrastructure are the most challenging agendas for low-income countries. However, low-income countries made considerable progress in ending extreme poverty and providing access to essential services and infrastructure, particularly under SDG-3: Good Health and Wellbeing and SDG-8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. At the same time, low-income countries tend to have lower SDG Index scores because of the categories of SDG targets they are addressing, such as extreme poverty and providing access to essential services and infrastructure.



Country-specific SDG progress between 2016-2020

Among the countries, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Cambodia have progressed the most in terms of the SDG Index score. At the same time, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and the Republic of the Congo have declined the most in the SDG index score over the same period. Other than Sweden and Denmark, very few countries have been able to maintain their SDG ranking between 2016 and 2020. Some of the other countries that were able to maintain their ranking include Austria, Ireland, Malta, Albania, Morocco, and a few others.

The Sustainable Development Report 2020 assessment shows that low-income countries are on track or performing moderately well in only two SDGs: SDG-13 Climate Change Action and SDG-8 Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Lower-middle-income countries are on track or performing moderately in eight SDGs: SDG-13 Climate Change Action; SDG-1: No Poverty; SDG-2: Zero Hunger; SDG-3: Good Health and Wellbeing; SDG-6: Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG-7: Affordable and Clean Energy; SDG-9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure.

Upper-middle-income countries are either on track or performing moderately well in most areas except SDG-14: Life Below Water, SDG-15: Life on Land, and SDG-17 Partnership for the Goals.

High-income countries mostly performed positively in most SDGs except in two areas where performance stagnated: SDG-13 Climate Change Action and SDG-14: Life Below Water.

Region-wise analysis of data showed SDG-10: Reduced Inequalities and SDG-11 Sustainable Cities and Communities are the two most concerning agendas, and these two areas are categorized as the “Major challenges remain” or “Significant challenges remain” or “Challenges remain” agenda.

Table-1a SDG trends in 2020 of countries by Income Groups

SDGs	NO POVERTY	ZERO HUNGER	GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	QUALITY EDUCATION	GENDER EQUALITY	CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
Income Group	SDG-1	SDG-2	SDG-3	SDG-4	SDG-5	SDG-6	SDG-7	SDG-8	SDG-9
Low-Income Countries	Stagnant	Stagnant	Stagnant	NA	Stagnant	Stagnant	Stagnant	Moderately increasing	Stagnant
Lower-middle-Income Countries	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Stagnant	Stagnant	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing
Upper-middle-income Countries	On Track	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	On Track	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing
High-income Countries	On Track	Moderately increasing	On Track	On Track	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	On Track	On Track

Table-1b SDG trends in 2020 of countries by Income Groups

SDGs	REDUCED INEQUALITIES	SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	CLIMATE ACTION	LIFE BELOW WATER	LIFE ON LAND	PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTION	PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS
Income Group	SDG-10	SDG-11	SDG-12	SDG-13	SDG-14	SDG-15	SDG-16	SDG-17
Low-Income Countries	NA	Stagnant	NA	On Track	Declined	Stagnant	Stagnant	Stagnant
Lower-middle-Income Countries	NA	Stagnant	NA	On Track	Stagnant	Stagnant	Stagnant	Stagnant
Upper-middle-income Countries	NA	Moderately increasing	NA	Moderately increasing	Stagnant	Declined	Moderately increasing	Declined
High-income Countries	NA	Moderately increasing	NA	Stagnant	Stagnant	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing	Moderately increasing

Regarding government strategies and policy actions for climate mitigation, the Sustainable Development Report (2020) highlights that only six countries (Bhutan, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, and the Philippines) have made sufficient commitment and effort to hold global warming well below 2°C. Unfortunately, economically stronger or bigger countries such as the United States, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Vietnam are categorized as “critically insufficient” for their low commitment to mitigating climate change.

Region-wise SDG Ranking between 2016-2020

SDG Progress in Europe between 2016-2020

In general, European countries are the best performers in the SDG rankings compared with the rest of the world. In 2020, 46% of all European countries were able to improve their respective SDG ranking, compared with the 2016 SDG ranking index. In 2020, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Norway were the five top SDG-ranking countries in the region and the rest of the world.

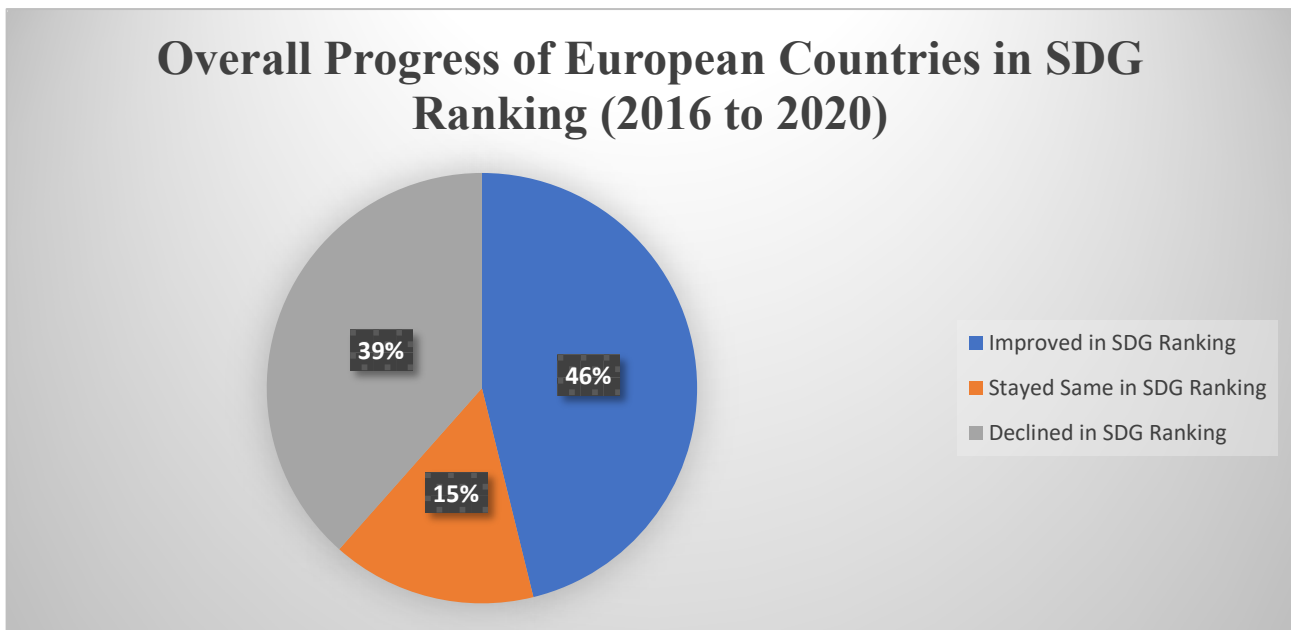


Table 2 Comparative SDG Ranking of European Countries

European Countries			
Countries	2016- SDG Ranking	2020 - SDG Ranking	Overall Status
Sweden	1	1	Stayed Same
Denmark	2	2	Stayed Same
Norway	3	6	Declined
Finland	4	3	Improved
Switzerland	5	15	Declined
Germany	6	5	Improved
Austria	7	7	Stayed Same
Netherlands	8	9	Declined
Iceland	9	26	Declined
United Kingdom	10	13	Declined
France	11	4	Improved
Belgium	12	11	Improved
Ireland	14	14	Stayed Same
Czech Republic	15	8	Improved
Luxembourg	16	44	Declined
Slovenia	17	12	Improved
Estonia	21	10	Improved
Belarus	23	18	Improved
Hungary	24	29	Declined
Slovak Republic	26	27	Declined
Latvia	28	24	Improved
Spain	30	22	Improved
Lithuania	31	36	Declined
Malta	32	32	Stayed Same
Bulgaria	33	39	Declined
Portugal	34	25	Improved
Italy	35	30	Improved
Croatia	36	19	Improved
Greece	37	43	Declined
Poland	38	25	Improved
Serbia	39	33	Improved
Romania	41	38	Improved
Moldova	44	42	Improved
Ukraine	46	47	Declined
Russian Federation	47	57	Declined
Macedonia, FYR	58	62	Declined
Montenegro	60	72	Declined
Albania	68	68	Stayed Same
Bosnia and Herzegovina	73	50	Improved



Figure-2 Overall Progress of European Countries in SDG Ranking (2016-2020)



Although Europe has performed better than the rest of the world, there remain wide disparities in equity across European countries and population groups. The Leave No One Behind (LNOB) Index, which measures inequalities within countries, shows Eastern and Central Europe faces significant challenges in terms of material deprivation, access to care, quality education, greater poverty, and lack of infrastructure, including broadband internet connection.

Persistent high internal inequalities in many European countries also impact their overall SDG rankings. Overall, the assessment shows that goals related to responsible consumption and production, action against climate change, and biodiversity loss are most concerning, and the trajectories in these indicators show that the actions undertaken to achieve these goals by 2030 are largely insufficient.

SDG Progress among North and South American countries between 2016-2020

Among North and South American countries, Canada, Chile, the United States, Costa Rica, and Uruguay are the top five SDG high-ranking countries in the overall ranking. At the same time, Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil are the only countries in the region that have yet to show progress in the comprehensive attainment of the 17 SDGs since 2016. Venezuela is the only country losing its SDG index score because of its declining performance on SDG-1 No Poverty, SDG-2 Zero Hunger, and SDG-3, Good Health and Wellbeing. Conversely, Argentina and Brazil have not shown progress in the last five years due to declining trends on SDG-8, decent work and economic growth, and SDG 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions, respectively.

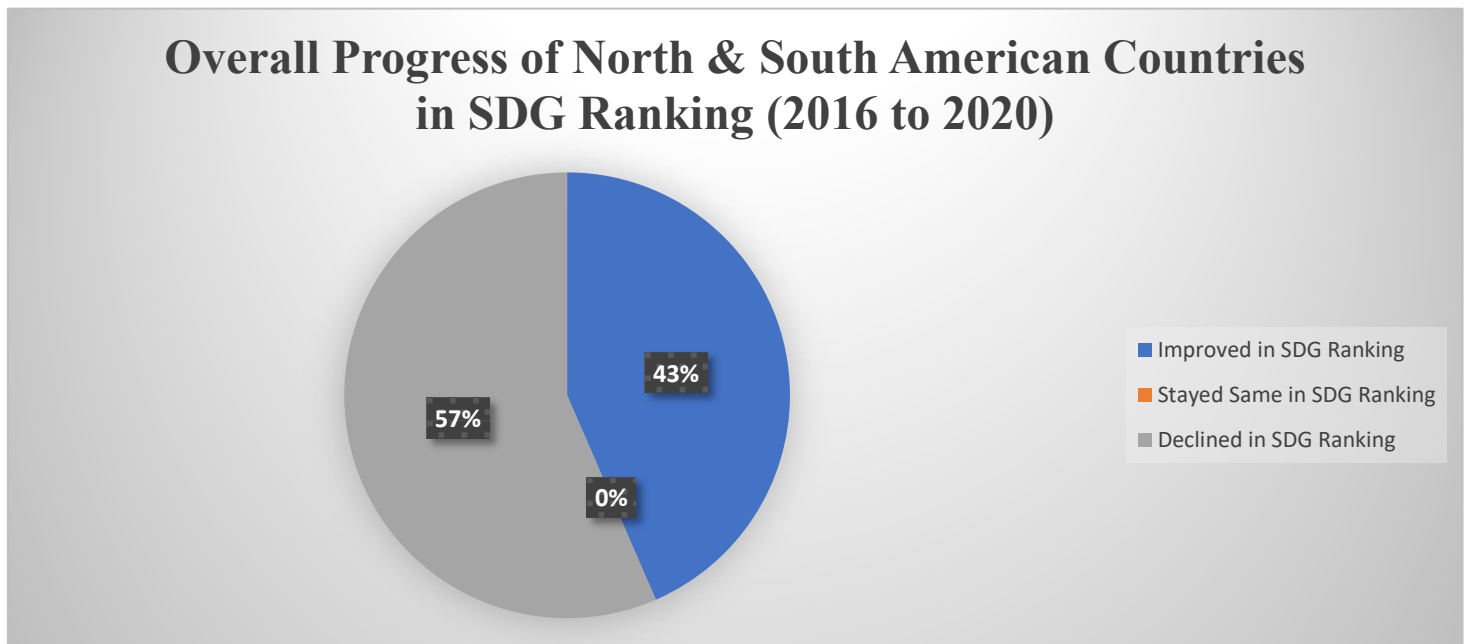
Table 3 Comparative SDG Rankings of North & South American Countries

North & South America			
Countries	2016- SDG Ranking	2020 - SDG Ranking	Overall Status
Canada	13	21	Declined
United States	25	31	Declined
Uruguay	40	45	Declined
Chile	42	28	Improved
Argentina	43	51	Declined
Brazil	52	53	Declined
Costa Rica	53	35	Improved
Mexico	56	69	Declined
Venezuela, RB	62	118	Declined
Panama	70	81	Declined
Ecuador	71	46	Improved
Paraguay	75	90	Declined
Jamaica	77	84	Declined
Trinidad and Tobago	78	98	Declined
Peru	81	61	Improved
Suriname	87	86	Improved
Bolivia	89	79	Improved
Nicaragua	90	85	Improved
Colombia	91	67	Improved
Dominican Republic	92	73	Improved
El Salvador	94	77	Improved
Guyana	101	124	Declined
Honduras	102	105	Declined
Guatemala	106	120	Declined
Haiti	144	154	Declined

Among all the North and South American countries, only 43% of countries in the region have been able to improve their SDG ranking in 2020 compared with their 2016 SDG ranking. In the South American region, the lack of innovation due to relatively low public expenditure on R & D, high-income inequalities, insecurity, high homicide rate, and corruption are the biggest challenges.



Figure-3 Overall Progress of North & South American Countries in SDG Ranking (2016 to 2020)



SDG Progress among African countries between 2016-2020

Among African countries, only 12% have been able to improve their SDG ranking in 2020 compared with their respective 2016 position. Africa, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Cabo Verde, and Ghana are the top five best-performing countries in the SDG index score. The North African countries are generally the better-performing countries, while the Central African countries lag the furthest behind in the region.

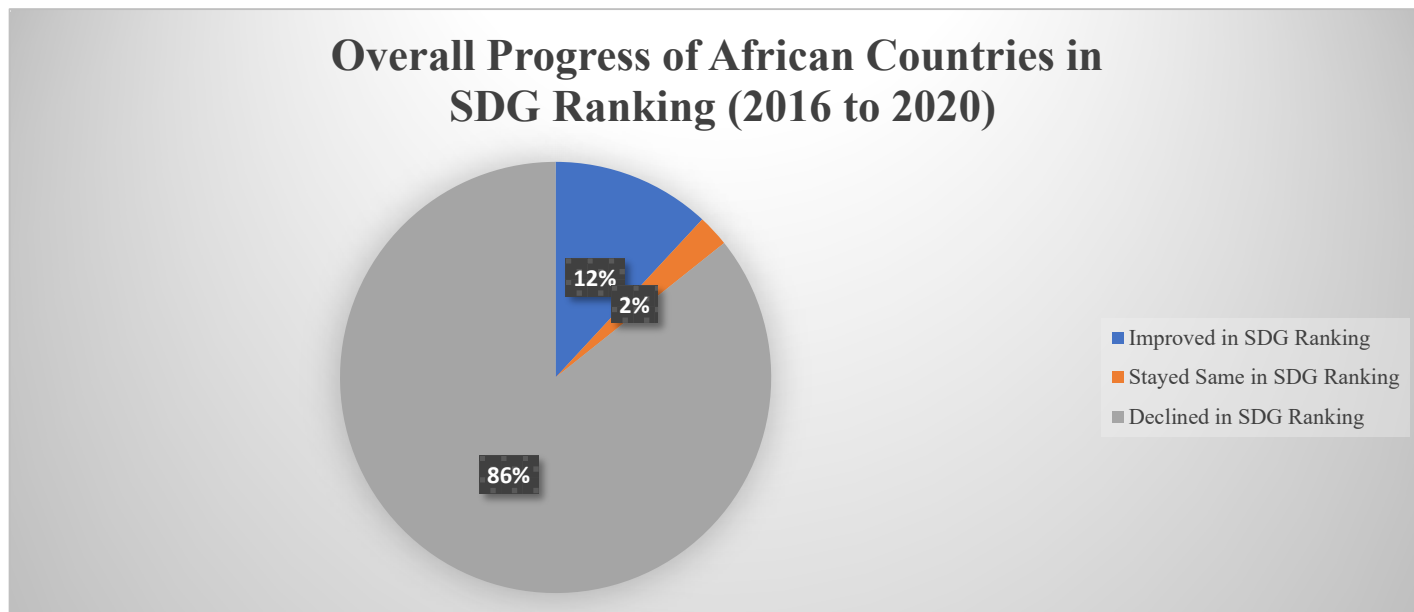
SDG-3 Good Health and Wellbeing, SDG-9 Infrastructure, and SDG-16 Peace, justice, and strong institutions are the most critical areas for the continent. However, the continent performs relatively better in SDG-13 Climate Action and SDG-12 Responsible Consumption and Production.

The most important fact from the African continent is that 94% of the countries have either shown the significant requisite commitment to set up institutional arrangements for successful implementation of the SDGs or aligned their national development plans with the SDGs.

Table 4 Comparative SDG Ranking of African Countries

Africa			
Countries	2016- SDG Ranking	2020 SDG Ranking	Overall Status
Tunisia	51	63	Declined
Morocco	64	64	Stayed Same
Egypt, Arab Rep.	66	83	Declined
Mauritius	69	108	Declined
Botswana	80	121	Declined
Algeria	83	143	Declined
Gabon	93	111	Declined
Cabo Verde	96	92	Improved
South Africa	99	110	Declined
Ghana	104	100	Improved
Namibia	108	119	Declined
Zimbabwe	109	125	Declined
Congo, Rep.	111	135	Declined
Cameroon	112	133	Declined
Lesotho	113	141	Declined
Senegal	114	127	Declined
Swaziland	116	NA	NA
Kenya	120	123	Declined
Angola	121	149	Declined
Rwanda	122	132	Declined
Uganda	123	142	Declined
Cote d'Ivoire	124	128	Declined
Ethiopia	125	136	Declined
Tanzania	126	131	Declined
Sudan	127	159	Declined
Burundi	128	143	Declined
Togo	129	147	Declined
Benin	130	145	Declined
Malawi	131	152	Declined
Mauritania	132	130	Improved
Mozambique	133	140	Declined
Zambia	134	148	Declined
Mali	135	156	Declined
Gambia, The	136	129	Improved
Sierra Leone	138	153	Declined
Madagascar	140	161	Declined
Nigeria	141	160	Declined
Guinea	142	150	Declined
Burkina Faso	143	137	Improved
Chad	145	164	Declined
Niger	146	157	Declined
Congo, Dem. Rep.	147	158	Declined
Liberia	148	162	Declined
Central African Republic	149	166	Declined

Figure-4 Overall Progress of African Countries in SDG Ranking (2016-2020)



SDG Progress among Asia & Oceania countries between 2016-2020

Among Asia and Oceania countries, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Cyprus, and Australia were the top five better-ranking countries in 2020. In this region, 39% of all countries have improved their respective SDG ranking in 2020 compared with their 2016 overall ranking. The region has made reasonable progress on SDG targets relating to economic growth, quality education, food security, women's role in decision-making, access to essential sanitation services, reduction in maternal mortality, child mortality, R&D for health.

Some elements of progress were also made in SDG-7: affordable and clean energy. Over the years the region has made considerable progress in SDG-1:No Poverty, SDG-2:Zero hunger, SDG-3:Good health and wellbeing, SDG-5:Gender equality, SDG-6: Clean water and sanitation, SDG-8:Decent work and economic growth, SDG-15: Life on land, SDG-16:Peace, justice and strong institutions, and SDG-17:Partnership for the goals.

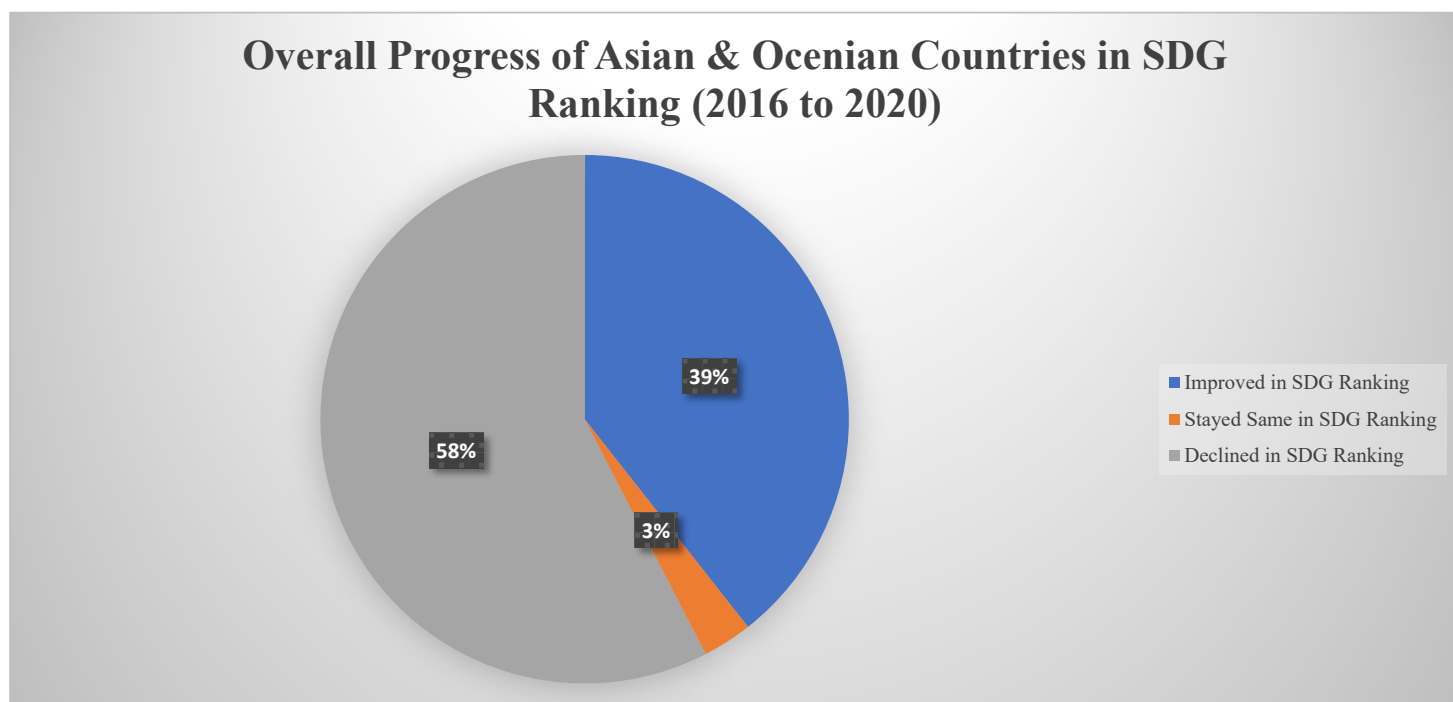
At the same time, the region faces many challenges and reverse trends in targets, such as their share of renewable energy, climate change policies, loss of biodiversity, sustainable/inclusive industrialization, human trafficking, and non-discriminatory laws. Within the region, there have been varying degrees of progress.

For example, North and Central Asia have progressed in reducing inequalities (SDG-10), whereas South-East Asia has regressed in SDG-10. South West Asia has made the most progress in SDG-3: Good health and Wellbeing. South East Asia progressed most in SDG-4: Quality Education, SDG-9 Industry, innovation, and infrastructure. East and North East Asia have improved in SDG-2: Zero Hunger, SDG-4: Quality Education, and SDG-6: Clean water and sanitation.

Table 5 Comparative SDG Ranking of Asian Countries

Asia & Oceania			
Countries	2016- SDG Ranking	2020 SDG Ranking	Overall Status
Japan	18	17	Improved
Singapore	19	93	Declined
Australia	20	37	Declined
New Zealand	22	16	Improved
Korea, Rep.	27	20	Improved
Israel	29	40	Declined
Cyprus	45	34	Improved
Turkey	48	70	Declined
Qatar	49	103	Declined
Armenia	50	75	Declined
Kazakhstan	54	65	Declined
Tajikistan	72	78	Declined
Oman	74	76	Declined
China	76	48	Improved
Iran, Islamic Rep.	79	59	Improved
Bhutan	82	80	Improved
Mongolia	84	107	Declined
Saudi Arabia	85	97	Declined
Lebanon	86	95	Declined
Vietnam	88	49	Improved
Philippines	95	99	Declined
Sri Lanka	97	94	Improved
Indonesia	98	101	Declined
Kuwait	100	112	Declined
Nepal	103	96	Improved
Iraq	105	113	Declined
Lao PDR	107	116	Declined
India	110	117	Declined
Pakistan	115	134	Declined
Myanmar	117	104	Improved
Bangladesh	118	109	Improved
Cambodia	119	106	Improved
Yemen, Rep.	137	151	Declined
Afghanistan	139	139	Stayed Same
Papua New Guinea	NA	155	NA

Figure-5 Overall Progress of Asian & Oceanian Countries in SDG Ranking (2016-2020)



SDG progress among SAARC Region between 2016-2020

South Asia is one of the most populated regions within Asia and Oceania. It is home to about 22% of the world's population (about 1.76 billion, as of 2016's data).

Table 6 Comparative SDG Ranking of SAARC Countries

South Asia (SAARC) Countries	2016 - SDG Ranking	2020 - SDG Ranking	Overall Progress
Bhutan	82	80	Improved
Maldives	NA	91	Improved
Sri Lanka	97	94	Improved
Nepal	103	96	Improved
Bangladesh	118	109	Improved
India	110	117	Declined
Pakistan	115	134	Declined
Afghanistan	139	139	Stayed Same

The region has one of the largest concentrations of the underprivileged population, with acute caste system issues, many dowry deaths and honour killings, farmers' suicides, water and sanitation problems, environmental degradation, and severe pressures on wildlife and biodiversity. Within the SAARC region, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh are the better-performing countries, improving their ranking.

SDG progress in Australia between 2016-2020

Australia is among the high-income OECD countries. Compared with its 2016 SDG ranking, Australia has dropped from 20th overall ranking to 37th. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2020, Australia is in the “On Track” or “SDG achieved” category only in SDG-3 (Good Health & Wellbeing). In other SDGs, such as SDG-5: Gender Equality and SDG-8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, Australia is in the “On Track” category. However, the agendas are categorized as “Significant challenges remain.”

Australia’s following SDGs, such as SDG-10: Reduce Inequalities, SDG-11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG-13: Climate Action, SDG-14: Life Below Water, SDG-15: Life on Land, and SDG-17: Partnerships for the goal, are classified as “stagnant”, with varying degrees of challenges ranging from significant to primary. SDG-12: Responsible consumption and production remain two significant challenges for Australia. In the rest of the SDG indicators, the country has achieved a moderate level of improvement with varying degrees of challenges.

Conclusion

The overall region-wise analysis showed that from 2010 onwards, countries in East and South Asia have progressed the most, and similar progress is also noticed in these regions post-2015 after the implementation of SDGs. African countries made significant improvements during the MDG period (2000 – 2015); however, post-2015, these countries have made some progress in SDGs. Furthermore, on average, countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa have increased their SDG index score by more than one point.

Income-wise analysis shows that high-income countries may have the highest SDG index score but have progressed moderately in SDGs since 2015, while low- and middle-income countries have progressed faster in SDGs than high-income countries.

The SDG trend analysis highlights indicators relating to SDG-1: No Poverty, SDG-9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, and SDG-11: Sustainable Cities and Communities have made the most rapid progress since 2015. Globally, access to primary transport infrastructure, broadband connection, and global investment in R&D have shown the most promising trends. About 95% of the world’s population in 2020 is covered by 3G or higher-quality mobile networks, one of the most significant universal achievements.

In conclusion, even though progress in SDGs between 2016 and 2020 shows mixed success, the impact of COVID-19 may have wiped out gains in poverty reduction, employment, health, and income inequality. Only future data will demonstrate the extent of such losses.

Sources: 2016 & 2020 Online Database for Sustainable Development Report; Sustainable Development Report 2020

